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Atlas of the Great Irish Famine

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John Crowley, William J. Smyth, and Mike Murphy (eds.), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork University Press, 2012).

Mapping the impact of the Great Irish Famine has generated two important publications to date: a volume based on data from the 1841-1851 census prepared by the team at Queen's University Belfast associated with the Database of Irish Historical Statistics, published as *Mapping the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin, 1999), and the online *Irish Famine Data Atlas* (2011), produced by the National Centre for Geocomputation at NUI Maynooth, led by Stewart Fotheringham. The former used the poor law union as its basic unit of analysis, whereas the latter was based on analysis of District Electoral Divisions, a much more sensitive measure. In 2012 the *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* appeared edited by a team of Cork historiographical geographers. It was rightly acclaimed as a publication milestone, not simply on the basis of it being a wonderful production, but also as a major achievement for scholarship of the Irish Famine. In this instance, the *Atlas* seems to have been very much the brainchild of William J. Smyth, the leading figure in the development of historical geography in Ireland, who retired recently from UCC. The extent of Smyth's influence on the discipline in Ireland is illustrated by the range of contributions to a recently published festschrift edited by Patrick J. Duffy and William Nolan.

There is much to commend about this volume. The essays by Smyth in particular bring a whole new perspective to the study of the Irish Famine, not least because they are careful pieces of scholarship based on a deep knowledge of the nature of Irish society. Historical geographers have had relatively little to say about the Irish Famine, since the pioneering work of T. W. Freeman and S. H. Cousens in the 1950s and 1960s. It is therefore very appropriate that some of the most insightful and original contributions are by John Crowley, Patrick Duffy, Mary Kelly, David P. Nally and Matthew Stout. Another strand which is less familiar is the excellent series of essays by historical archaeologists such as Charles E Osrer Jr on Ballykilcline, Co. Roscommon, Jonny Gerber on the Kilkenny workhouse and Don Walker, Michael Henderson and Natasha Powers (all strangely left off of the list of contributors with the exception of Powers?) on Irish migrants in the East End of London in the 1840s and 1850s.

Historians also feature prominently in the distinguished roll call of contributors. Most of the leading historians working on the Irish Famine contribute at least one important essay (largely, it should be said, on the basis of work published elsewhere). The remarkable growth in local history in Ireland is reflected in the four sections that contain 19 case-studies drawn from across the country, showing in graphic detail the effects of misguided relief policies on localities. But this is not just a work confined to historians and historical geographers: there are excellent essays on workhouse clothing by the art historian Hilary O'Kelly, on folklore by Cathal Póirtéir, on representations of the Irish Famine in works of art by Catherine Marshall, as well

as pieces that reflect on the contemporary relevance of the Irish famine by prominent scholars and activities concerned with today's food shortages.

One of the intriguing features of the essays from a range of disciplines is the conceptual framework. Historical geographers such as Smyth and Nally start out from a colonial or post-colonial perspective on Irish history, taking this more or less for granted. Yet historians such as Peter Grey, Christine Kinealy or Cormac Ó Gráda while being strongly critical of official relief policy tend not to see this in the broader frame of British colonial policy. And curiously the scholars who have offered the most strident post-colonial analyses of the Irish Famine from the perspective of literature or cultural studies such as David Lloyd or Terry Eagleton simply don't feature at all, except in one short essay by Chris Morash on literature. Given the centrality of the Famine in Irish literature this seems a missed opportunity to open up a dialogue between the social scientific and humanist approaches to this event.

The expectation created by the title is that this is essentially a mapping of the Famine. The editors of the *Atlas* choose to use the civil parish to generate using GIS the 70 or so maps that feature in the *Atlas*. But ironically the maps themselves act more as supporting act in many of the textual contributions than drive the volume as a whole. But careful study of these maps is rewarding as they tell a complex story of regional differentiation that exposes the myth of universal suffering in terms of geography. The full page ones are excellent but why a number were produced in much smaller formats is not readily comprehensible, as the cramped presentation makes it hard to distinguish particular localities or regions. As might be expected the west coast of Ireland was the locus of the Famine, and one map (p. 21) makes the less well-known point that towns also experienced significant population declines and Famine was not wholly a rural experience. In essence, the collection of maps (frustratingly there is no single listing) undermine many preconceptions about the regional dimensions of the crisis. In terms of extending our knowledge of those dark days in Irish history, that is the lasting contribution of the *Atlas*. But the cartography is only one part of this wonderful if harrowing visualisation of the Irish Famine. This lavishly illustrated volume contains over 200 images, from photographs to reproductions of contemporary documents and a whole range of other illustrative material. These are the 'voices' of the Irish Famine, even if those who suffered the most rarely feature in such documentation. It is difficult to adequately convey the richness of these materials along with the high quality of the reproductions. Judged narrowly as a resource, this volume should be in every library, but that is to underestimate the significance of the *Atlas* which is far greater than this.

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